

COLLECTION OVERVIEW

DECORATIVE ARTS

I. SCOPE

This collection overview focuses on the book and periodical collections covering Decorative Arts topics in the General Collections of the Library of Congress. The study of the Decorative Arts, once referred to as "the minor arts" includes objects and areas of study such as furniture, textiles, pottery and porcelain, interior decoration, silver, flatware, basketry, objects of personal adornment such as clothing, costume and jewelry, tools and armor, and sometimes miscellaneous categories such as coins, stamps, and commemorative objects. This overview also encompasses the "domestic technology" collection at the Library, which falls within the purview of the Decorative Arts. These and additional topics such as material culture, handicraft industry and manufacture are also related to this interdisciplinary topic.

Decorative Arts researchers seek information on a broad array of objects ranging from unique, rare and handcrafted to mass-produced, readily available collectibles. The resources and materials used to identify these objects are as disparate as the objects themselves. Decorative Arts research may encompass periods and styles, identification, authentication, and provenance, as well as investigations into industry, community, and social structure. Researchers in this field are also interested in the biographies of and techniques used by craftspeople and designers, as well as the social history that provides the context for the development and use of decorative objects.

This summary does not address the vast collections of Decorative Arts materials that can be found in the Rare Book and Special Collections Division, or the Prints and Photographs Division. Each of these collections is invaluable for the study of Decorative Arts although materials useful for the study of Decorative Arts can ostensibly be found in every reading room at the Library. The Fine and Decorative Arts collections in the Library of Congress have developed over time and are the natural outgrowth of the nucleus of materials included in Thomas Jefferson's library. Jefferson, who could be described as a Renaissance man, was interested in most aspects of human endeavor. He was known for his interest in the applied and mechanical arts known today as the Decorative Arts. The theory and practice of architecture was of also of particular importance to Thomas Jefferson, who was himself an architect. Jefferson's library included such Decorative Arts titles as Chippendale's *Gentleman and Cabinet makers Director*; *Chambers Chinese Designs*; *The Builder's Dictionary, or the Gentleman and Architect's Companion*; James Gibbs' *A Book of Architecture, Containing Designs of Buildings and Ornaments*; and *James on Gardening* which includes information about garden ornamentation.

II. SIZE

The Library of Congress maintains a research level collection in every major subdiscipline of the Decorative Arts. According to the Library's Online Catalog, Class NK, the major class for Decorative Arts literature, had approximately 55,000 titles as of October 2007. This represents an increase of over 48% in the past fifteen years. However, the study of Decorative Arts also leads the researcher to several other LC classes, including subclasses of class G, H, T, and Z. The majority of the more than 32,000 items in the TT classification represent many Decorative Arts or domestic technology topics. Within the voluminous GT classification can be found materials on international costume and clothing history. The Research Libraries Group Conspectus shows that the Library of Congress collects at a research or comprehensive level, as do other large Decorative Arts institutions, including Yale, Harvard, the Library of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the New York Public Library.

III. GENERAL RESEARCH STRENGTHS

Due in large part to Copyright deposits, the Library has a very strong collection of book and serial publications about Decorative Arts published in the United States. Exchange and gift arrangements with major museums, libraries, and other art-related organizations in the United States and abroad have also contributed to the collections of Decorative Arts topics. The General Collections house one of the most exhaustive Decorative Arts research collections in the United States. The breadth and depth of the collections provide context for international material culture. Decorative Arts as a recognized academic discipline is a fairly recent phenomenon, dating from the mid 1960's. Prior to the recognition of the field in academia, much of the research in this broad area was accomplished by curators, enthusiasts, and collectors with strong interests in particular areas. The scholarly literature about Decorative Arts topics has flourished since the 1960s.

Another factor which has influenced study in the Decorative Arts is the strong interdisciplinary nature of the research; scholars in the Decorative Arts come from a variety of fields including popular or material culture, folklore, textile design and production, anthropology, interior design, and history of technology, in addition to the Fine Arts. The Library's collections complement the interdisciplinary needs of current Decorative Arts researchers. The collection is encyclopedic in scope and researchers from many fields can locate materials from many related scholarly fields. These factors, combined with the Library's collection policies, and especially its status as a Copyright deposit library, have made the Library of Congress an invaluable collection for Decorative Arts research, especially in American Decorative Arts. The Library's collections include many materials published by small publishing houses, or by independent scholars. Often this material is the only information available, about a particular company, artist, or movement.

IV. AREAS OF DISTINCTION

In addition to the categories of materials mentioned earlier, Decorative Arts in the General Collections are especially rich in many areas. The Library has a moderate but important

collection of nineteenth- and twentieth-century trade literature. Manufacturers' trade catalogs are a significant source of much valuable and useful information for those interested in specific companies, Decorative Arts history, history of design, advertising techniques, and trends of various industries. Catalogs chronicle the development of different styles and tastes of the public and can be used to identify articles as well as to provide information on specifications, prices, and types of material used in construction or manufacture. Also of significance to scholars of the Decorative Arts of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are the complete runs of key journals that richly document international Decorative Arts movements from 1880 forward. Serial publications that are dedicated to particular types of industries and collections are also prevalent. Several microform collections, including *Trade Catalogs from the Corning Museum of Glass*, *Trade Catalogues at Winterthur*, *Architectural Trade Catalogs from Avery Library*, and a long run of *Sears Roebuck catalogs*, in addition to many other sources, are valuable assets to Decorative Arts researchers. For the study of domestic technology, especially fashion, costume, dressmaking, and needlework, lengthy runs of pattern books from companies such as Vogue and Simplicity and the many nineteenth and early twentieth-century manuals for knitting, weaving, embroidery, and other kinds of handwork are invaluable. Publications from various world expositions of the past 150 years are also very useful. In addition to historic materials, the Decorative Arts collections also cover contemporary American craft and all media included in that broad category such as wood, fiber, glass, clay, metal, and other materials used for creative expression.

Because of the breadth and depth of the entire collection, the Library also provides strong support material for increasingly popular interdisciplinary or cross- disciplinary studies (e.g. American studies) involving both Fine and Decorative Arts. Several large and important microform collections contribute to the overall strength of Decorative Arts materials.

V. ELECTRONIC RESOURCES

Various electronic databases to which the Library of Congress subscribes cover a broad range of topics applicable to the study of Fine and Decorative Arts. Due to the broad and interdisciplinary nature of the topics, many databases, both general and specific, include valuable information related to these fields. Databases and electronic sources that are frequently consulted, and that comprise invaluable resources for the study of Fine and Decorative Arts include: *Digital Dissertations*, *Art Index*, *Art Index Retrospective*, *Artifact*, *Bibliography on the History of Art (BHA)*, *Design and Applied Arts Index (DAAI)*, *Avery Index to Architectural Periodicals*, *Arts & Humanities Citation Index*, *Index to Nineteenth-Century Art Periodicals*, *America's Historical Newspapers*, and numerous other applicable titles. Some titles offer both current and retrospective coverage, and many provide full-text coverage. In addition, the Library's subscription to *JSTOR* offers full-text of articles in significant academic journals. *JSTOR* includes 22 titles in the field of architecture and architectural history and 72 titles in the field of art and art history.

The American Memory project provides, among other things, still and moving images, prints, field documentation and other formats that document the American experience. It is a digital record of American history and creativity, and as such includes many art related materials and

information. Over one million items are available through this project, and researchers have the ability to search for specific terms across all collections.

VI. WEAKNESSES/EXCLUSIONS

Although the Library has a good sampling of the publications of individual collectors or societies, there are also many that may not have been acquired. Institutions such as the Corning Museum of Glass that specialize in one area of decorative-arts have the ability and perseverance to pursue these elusive publications. The Library lacks many exhibition catalogs both from abroad and from many smaller American museums and galleries, due in part to a previous collection policy that did not encourage acquiring materials less than fifty pages in length. In the field of Decorative Arts these publications often represent the best information available about a particular factory, craftsperson, or movement. Auction catalogs from local or regional auction houses are not collected, since the Library has concentrated on collecting auction catalogs from larger houses. Although the Library's collections of trade catalogs are notable, they are supplemented by microform collections from other libraries. Not only does LC lack many older trade catalogs, but it also does not collect contemporary (retail) catalogs that will give future researchers an overview of the current culture. Although researchers are now able to access masters degree theses from Winterthur through *Digital Dissertations*, the addition of master's theses in the Decorative Arts from other institutions would strengthen our holdings, as these theses from often provide unique scholarly research on Decorative Arts topics.